



Raising the flag for the first time

Aruban dignitaries officially welcome the Westin® Aruba Resort

Wednesday afternoon saw the official raising of the Westin® flag over what was previously known for years as the Wyndham Aruba Resort, Spa, and Casino. Hotel owner Michael Belfonti of Belfonti Capital Partners, along with Rob Smith, who remains at the helm of the resort as General Manager, welcomed the executives of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc.® and the island's top dignitaries for this august occasion.

Gathered on the lawn before the resort that originally opened as The Concorde, an audience of VIP's and press were welcomed by Rob Smith, who acted as MC for the afternoon and introduced Michael Belfonti to the gathering. He in turn welcomed the Prime Minister of Aruba, Nelson Oduber, Minister of Finance and Economy, Nilo Swaen, and Minister of Tourism and Transport, Edison Brieson, along with Graeme Davis, Vice President of Operations for Starwood Hotels and Resorts. Mr. Belfonti opened his statements by saying that "this event would not be possible without the four hundred plus professionals that work at this hotel," and offered particular thanks to the people that have worked so hard on the conversion of the hotel to Westin standards over the past eight months. He also took that moment to introduce native-born Marietta Ras, the new Managing Director of Aruba Hotel Enterprises, and described her as "priceless in helping them to make this transition," and deserving of this reward and title.

Belfonti, also declared that "The Westin Aruba Resort will be the crown jewel of the Caribbean and one of the most exclusive properties on the island. We are supportive of the growth in Aruba's economy and tourism and are excited to raise the Westin flag in Aruba and deliver all of Westin's world renowned signature services and amenities."

Graeme Davis was next to take the podium, who stated, "it is an honor on behalf of our 145,000 associates across the world to now be a part of this special occasion." He described the existing resorts and the new Westin® Aruba Resort as "one family." "No brand, such as Westin has a future without a great culture," he announced, "and we are so fortunate to have an incredible culture here in Aruba. With the government, the community, with all of the members of the island of Aruba, that culture brings our strength to this property, and to its success. We can have magnificent fixtures, we can have beautiful lobbies and great pools, but without a culture in the hotel and without a staff that brings it alive, we really have nothing. I am so proud to say that with our fellow 400 associates with my leader here, Rob Smith, and the culture, we'll have the most successful Westin in the history of our company."

Mr. Davis then went on to describe some of the innovations of the Westin brand, which warranted the twenty-four million dollars invested by Aruba Hotel Enterprises in bringing the hotel up to Westin quality specifications. He revealed that of the nine brands in the Starwood stable, the Westin is the fastest growing, and "most innovative." The Westin will be the first and only hotel in Aruba and the Caribbean to practice a no-smoking policy, which was described as a "bold move, and cutting edge by any hotel company."

Additionally called to the podium on behalf of Aruba were Jorge Pesquera, the Director of AHATA, the Aruba Hotel and Tourism Association, Nelson Oduber and Edison Brieson.

The Minister of Tourism declared, "Aruba is now experiencing a time of unprecedented tourism investment. We must therefore capitalize on these opportunities, and the renewed optimism and enthusiasm and an attitude of "do-ability"... We cannot continue doing things today as we did yesterday, because we will not succeed... Now is our time to learn from the experts what is feasible and sustainable, and open our minds to new ideas in order to keep our product fresh and competitive."

Minister Brieson went on to mention the interaction of investors with the local community. In many areas, socially and environmentally, one impacts on the other, and both must learn to preserve and utilize these assets. As a conscientious and productive partner in the future development of Aruba's tourism industry, he pronounced Westin and Starwood as "more than welcome. Thank you so much for showing your confidence in us."

Closing comments were made by Prime Minister Oduber, who announced, "the vision of the (Aruban) government is to upgrade the (tourism) product, and (to that end) they are very proud to have Westin on the island." He declared that he was very impressed when the plans of Starwood for their facility in Aruba were presented to him months ago. These plans included not only the total renovation of the existing resort, but also the construction of a Starwood Vacation Ownership® complex consisting of 154 two-bedroom villas on the adjacent property.

In closing, Prime Minister Oduber warmly welcomed the new developers and their plans, but also tipped a hat and asked the audience to recognize the achievements of Alphonso Riverol, the former owner of the resort, and the Wyndham chain for the years they maintained and enhanced its reputation.

The ceremonies ended with the raising of the American and Aruban flags accompanied by the national anthems of the countries, and finally the flag bearing the Westin name. The gathering retired to the Palm Beach Ballroom for a festive luncheon to which all employees not on duty had also been invited. The highlight of the event was an entertaining fashion show by employees modeling the new uniforms of their stations, whether they worked the “front of the house” or the “back of the house.”

The Westin Aruba Resort joins the almost 200 other four star Westins around the world, which their customers count on for quality service and accommodations. Their innovative and progressive policies will set new standards in Aruba’s tourism industry, and the investors expressed great confidence in the community and employees to not only live up to, but also exceed their standards. Both the investors and the Aruban government conveyed the utmost optimism in this partnership.